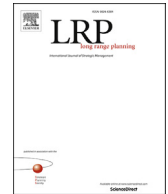


Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/lrp)

Long Range Planning

journal homepage: <http://www.elsevier.com/locate/lrp>

Grappling with the performative condition

Fabian Muniesa*

Mines ParisTech, PSL Research University, Centre de Sociologie de l'Innovation, i3 UMR CNRS 9217, France

A B S T R A C T

What kind of an anthropological puzzle does the performativity of strategy constitute? Rather than considering performativity as an operational concept or situating the discussion within the limits of strategy scholarship, this short essay asks how an emphasis on the performative can be regarded as a cultural condition, that is, as a ductile though crucial quality of the way in which things are made sense of in our present cultural setup. Suggesting seemingly extraneous associations between ideals of strategic management and business education, on the one hand, and archetypes of experimental performance and political will, on the other, the essay locates the ultimate interpretive category of this performative condition in the act of decision, and offers a critique of its anthropological limits.

© 2017 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Performativity as condition

Strategic management and performance: these two terms maintain quite an obvious relationship. But what happens if we examine anew this relationship in the light of the anthropological intuitions that the notion of *performativity* entails? That notion is as multifarious as its use in the study of management is: there exist multiple debates on how it should be understood, and for what purpose (Gond et al., 2016). The purpose of this essay, though, is to leave these definitional quarrels aside and examine instead how a *sense of the performative*, loosely understood, may characterize the culture of business conduct today, a culture strategic management is a constitutive part of. My hypothesis is quite straightforward: our contemporary business culture condition may very well consist of an *exacerbation* of the sense of the performative.

What can this mean? A broad, loose understanding of performativity requires that we abandon temporarily its usefulness as an operative concept and that we take it instead as a sort of a philosophical mood. What we shall find from that perspective despite disagreements in scope and formulation is, I suggest, a twofold emphasis on signification as act and on reality as effectuation (Muniesa, 2014). Things are considered in their capacity to *take place* (or not) and their meaning as something that ought to be *delivered* (or not). This is the meaning of *performance* I adopt. We can all agree, though, how ambiguous this word is. Compare, for example, the sense of disorder and surprise that one can get from experimental performance art to the sense of organizational control that a performance management tool is expected to convey. Add to this the sense of exceptional genius that bear an outstanding musical performance or the sense of steady speed required of a high performance competition automobile. Is all this the same? Is the balanced scorecard a happening? Is the famed performance measurement instrument developed by Robert S. Kaplan and David P. Norton comparable to the legendary situation ideated by Allan Kaprow for the “Fluids” installation?¹ As incongruous as this parallel may seem, we can identify in both cases, at least partially, a common sense of signification as act and reality as effectuation.

One of the most stimulating crucibles in which these diverse meanings of the idea of performance have been brewed together is Jon McKenzie's *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (2001). Cluttered with polysemy and paradox, the

* Centre de Sociologie de l'Innovation, Mines ParisTech, 60 Boulevard Saint-Michel, 75006 Paris, France.

E-mail address: fabian.muniesa@mines-paristech.fr.

¹ The performative features of the balanced scorecard (the performance management tool established in the early 1990s by Kaplan and Norton) have been discussed abundantly in the literature (see Busco and Quattrone, 2015). Same for Kaprow's happenings, although in a quite different domain. “Fluids,” created in 1967, consisted in people constructing large rectangular ice structures in several locations in Los Angeles and then leaving them to melt (see Schechner, 1988). But note that, from the viewpoint of strategic management, “Fluids” could certainly stand as a perfect counterexample of performance.

word “performance” still remains a key term of our time, McKenzie shows. In his book's acknowledgments, McKenzie offers the “paradox” that stimulated the writing:

I had just discovered the performance art of Laurie Anderson and happened to read Jean-François Lyotard on the postmodern condition of performativity. What struck me then still resonates today: “performance” can be read as both experimentation and normativity. (McKenzie, 2011: ix)

With both experimentation and normativity controlled by the idea of a conflation between meaning and acting, it is here where Kaprow's happening can meet the balanced scorecard. McKenzie is right in signalling the centrality of Lyotard in prompting awareness of the fact that what we are facing here is a cultural *condition*. The consultancy report on “The Problems of Knowledge in Most Developed Industrial Societies” that he delivered to the Council of Universities of Quebec in 1979, and which was later published with a more resounding title – *The Postmodern Condition* (Lyotard, 1984) – opens the path to these kinds of connections.² The postmodern condition, Lyotard clearly stated, is that of performativity. What did he mean by this? That knowledge did not occupy anymore a typically modern, critical position (knowledge situated outside the functioning of things in order to observe it), and had become instead an *effective* provision at the service of the functioning of things. Or: signification as operation and reality as engine. Lyotard's favourite examples in this report were of a managerial nature (he could have added the balanced scorecard had he stumbled upon it!), and his clearer attempts at defining performativity directed the reader's attention to notions of *efficiency*. But Lyotard, a philosopher, was also pointing there to the pragmatics of language and to J. L. Austin's notion of the performative utterance. In an obscure footnote, Lyotard tried to encrypt the connection between both:

The term performative has taken on a precise meaning in language theory since Austin. Later in this book, the concept will reappear in association with the term performativity (in particular, of a system) in the new current sense of efficiency measured according to an input/output ratio. The two meanings are not far apart. Austin's performative realizes the optimal performance. (Lyotard, 1984: 88)

That is cryptic indeed. The reader can follow Lyotard intuitively on the idea that “efficiency measured according to an input/output ratio” may have something to do with Austin's examination of statements that accomplish, somehow efficiently, the act they refer to. But what does it mean to say that “Austin's performative realizes the optimal performance”? I suggest that this abstruse sentence acquires a renewed meaning if we read it from McKenzie's disposition, for example reading it while listening to Laurie Anderson's minimalist hit “O Superman,” at once an astonishing commercial success, a demonstration of the efficacy of an economy of means, and a beautiful meditation on the troubles of force, triumph, achievement and *realization*.³ Such conflations between overachievement, maintenance and infringement (between the outstanding exaggeration, the optimal equilibrium and the nagging experiment) are almost exactly what performance is about. I proposed earlier on to consider the performative as a fuzzy cultural condition. We can perhaps start characterizing now this condition as a tension between all these multiple (though essentially *vertical*) directions that performance requires: stabilization (performing measuredly and steadily), elevation (performing excessively and excellently) and demotion (performing critically and disturbingly). How does strategic management fit into this, one may ask?

Acrobatics of the business self

Another recommendation – also McKenzie's – that may help us further this characterization is Peter Sloterdijk's remarkable *You Must Change Your Life* (2013), a philosophical excursion across the practices that constitute what the philosopher terms the “performative life” and which include all sorts of methods for the improvement of the self: ascetic acrobatics and esoteric rhetoric for practical redemption, from Patanjali's Yoga Sutras to the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola (and to L. Ron Hubbard's Dianetics). The performative life is a life of strict order but also a life of transformation: signification as act and reality as effectuation, augmented with the essentially crazy idea of a permanently acrobatic position. Sloterdijk's book is indeed, in essence, a meditation on Friedrich Nietzsche's Zarathoustra.

True, strategic management does not feature directly in Nietzsche. But the Nietzschean figure of the tightrope walker (featured crucially in the opening of *Thus Spoke Zarathoustra*) fits perfectly well the key persona of the postmodern condition exposed by Lyotard, at once ascetic and hyperbolic, the craftsperson of perpetual improvement, the tireless acrobat of valuation that contemporary management consulting requires. *The Equilibrists* is indeed the utterly appropriate title of a remarkable ethnography of management consulting offered by Alaric Bourgoïn, an ethnographer and a consultant (Bourgoïn, 2015). And equilibrists they are, indeed, those management consultants, at least in three senses opened by the acrobatic metaphor: three meanings that dovetail the threefold semantic tension identified above in the notion of performance. The first meaning is that of the measured and technically adequate gesture: performance of the consultant in the sense of correct

² On the reception of Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* in organizational theory, see Jones (2003).

³ Laurie Anderson, a performance artist and musician, became widely known outside the art world when her piece “O Superman” reached the top tier in UK and US pop charts. The piece was recorded and mixed at Anderson's home recording studio in 1981. First released as a single in 1981, it then appeared on Anderson's 1982 debut album, *Big Science*. Nonesuch Records released a re-mastered edition in 2007 and has since made available the official music video on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vkfpi2H8tOE> [accessed 15 September 2016].

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/10226926>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/10226926>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)